"We want to protect our neighbors," said Shawn Wombles, Emergency Management Director and Fire Chief for Johnson County, Georgia. "When Ben Franklin started the volunteer fire service, that's what it was all about: helping and protecting our neighbors."

Johnson County is in Middle Georgia, sixty miles southeast of Macon on the way towards Savannah. The county has a population of approximately 10,000, with Wrightsville, the county seat, surrounded by open rural country.

The low population density historically made it difficult to protect against wildland fires and structural fires across the county. Wombles said the county gets 350 calls every year. Half of the calls come from outside of Wrightsville. The city's fire department is salaried, while the others around the county heavily depend on volunteers. And Wrightsville's department didn't have the ability to cover the entire county.

Before the 1970s, there wasn't enough capacity in these rural communities to respond to wildland and structural fires. Many homes and small businesses were lost in the county every year, holding back the stability and growth of the many rural communities.

In 1975, the Georgia Forestry Commission (GFC) saw this gap in rural communities across the state and created the Rural Fire Defense Lease program "to establish an initial fire protection program for unprotected communities and to reinforce existing fire departments with equipment and training." Frank Sorrells, GFC's Chief of Forest Protection, recognized that, "if we could somehow take some of the surplus equipment and convert that over to fire suppression apparatus, fire trucks and pumps, that would increase the capacity not only for the rural communities but also for the Georgia Forestry Commission to help meet our mission to protect, suppress and prevent all wild land fires in Georgia."
With GFC’s help, we could start a fire department in our community with almost no start-up money involved.”
– Shawn Wombles, Johnson County Fire Department

GFC may acquire Federal Excess Personal Property (FEPP) from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service, which continues to own the equipment while GFC loans it to local fire departments through the Rural Fire Defense Lease program. In order for local communities to receive the equipment, they must submit a request to GFC and consult with their local county ranger. If their request is approved, they must sign an agreement with GFC ensuring that the equipment will be used and maintained.

Over the past four decades, GFC has distributed 930 pieces of fire suppression equipment to fire departments around the state through the program.

For areas like Johnson County, the program has had an enormous impact. The fire department, Wombles reported, receives an annual budget of about $28,000 - $10,000 of which comes from property taxes and goes towards insurance and workman's compensation liabilities, and the rest coming from a $10 annual “fire fee” per household. “You start doing the math,” Wombles said, “and you realize you can’t buy a truck for $18,000. You can barely even keep it maintained with that much.

“With GFC’s help, we could start a fire department in our community with almost no start-up money involved,” he continued. Through the Rural Fire Defense Lease program, Johnson County has started nine fire departments with 22 apparatus, bringing 1,000-gallon pumping capacity from 3,000-gallon tanks on the front of each piece of equipment.

The Insurance Services Organizations (ISO), which rates fire departments’ ability to adequately respond to fires, requires 4,000 gallons of water on the scene of a structural fire. Now, for calls from both urban and rural communities in Johnson County, the fire department can exceed the ISO standard with just two trucks.

Wombles credits GFC for that achievement. “We couldn’t afford fire protection in our county without the Rural Fire Defense Lease program. If I went to a truck vendor, we would’ve paid anywhere from $30,000 to $325,000 per truck. Through this program, we paid $50,000 compared to $325,000, I’ve got new equipment that exceeds the ISO standard, and we’re able to adequately protect our communities.

The program doesn’t just help support local fire departments; it also helps local homeowners and small business owners save money. By meeting and exceeding the ISO standard, insurance premiums are lower because they’re at a lower risk of losing the property to a fire. “Based on the value of the property, those homeowners and business owners can save $300 to $400 every year,” Sorrells said.

Sorrells sees this program as an example for other states and communities across the southeast and the country. “For a little bit of nothing, not a lot of funds, you can put fire suppression apparatus and vehicles into these communities to help the wildland fire agencies meet their mission.”

Wombles emphatically agreed. “If this program spread across the country, it would make our whole country’s fire service program a lot stronger and a lot better. It’s a collaborative effort of everyone working together towards the number one goal of protecting the citizens of our communities and our state.”